



Interview No. SAS4.0.02

Ruth Binsky

Interviewer: Brittany McClure

Location: Baltimore, Maryland

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Q: This is Brittany McClure interviewing Ruth Binsky. You joined the Left Bank Jazz Society in 1964.

Binsky: In 1964.

Q: Was that something you started?

Binsky: No. I was not one of the founders. I joined approximately four or five months after they became organized. I heard a program on the radio talking about their Sunday concert and decided I would go.

At the time there were not many members. So all of the members were working members and volunteers. There were promotions, mailing out flyers, and doing those kinds of things. I was not involved in booking any of the groups.

Q: Publicity stuff?

Binsky: The mailing of flyers and distribution of posters. There were not that many women in the organization at that particular time — three, maybe four at the most. So we would do the mailings.

Q: How did Left Bank get started?

Binsky: There was a group of men who had been in service together and had gone to the Left Bank in Paris to hear music. They would get together and play music and from those gatherings they decided to promote live jazz.

Q: Was it mainly national musicians or local musicians?

Binsky: In the beginning local musicians (although some of them are nationally-known). They later began to bring musicians in from New York City and use local rhythm sections for them to work with.

Q: Who were your favorite people?

Binsky: I guess some of my favorites were Jimmy Heath, Freddie Hubbard, Carmen McRae, Etta Jones and Philly Joe Jones. There were others that I enjoyed, Cedar Walton, and Billy Higgins.

Q: You said you saw your first concert when you were fifteen?

Binsky: I was fifteen, and I was able to hear Lambert, Hendricks and Ross and Dave Brubeck with Paul Desmond.

Q: Where was it?

Binsky: I think it may have been at the Lyric. It's been such a long time ago.

Q: When you worked at the North End Lounge, local musicians played there?

Binsky: Yes, but only on weekends. Terry Addison, the owner, was also a member of Left Bank. Before, when Mr. Bartz owned the North End Lounge, there were many Baltimore musicians playing there and also national musicians.

Q: When you were a teenager growing up, where did you go?

Binsky: Well, when I was a teenager growing up, I was not going out. As a matter of fact, I got married at seventeen. I listened to jazz on the radio, but I didn't attend concerts.

Q: So you just went to Left Bank?

Binsky: Not as a teenager. I was twenty-four years old when I heard about the Left Bank Jazz Society and I started going out on my own to hear music. I bought records and had records that belonged to family members, and I used to listen to a station that came out of Chicago late at night that played jazz all of the time. That was one of my favorite things to do.

Q: You're still involved in jazz now, right?

Binsky: Yes. Not as much as before. Left Bank doesn't present concerts weekly anymore. When they do present a concert, I usually go. I attend the monthly concerts and festivals of the Central Pennsylvania Friends of Jazz. I go to the East Coast Jazz Festival in Rockville every year. And lately there has been a lot of jazz in churches, jazz vespers. Sometimes I produce bus trips to Pennsylvania for Sunday concerts if I think there is a group that people from Baltimore will want to hear.

Q: How do you think the music scene here in Baltimore has changed?

Binsky: It's changed because we don't have many clubs featuring jazz. Back in what I would call "the day," and the day for me would have been when my parents were going out, I understand there were a number of clubs in and around Baltimore, especially Pennsylvania Avenue, that

featured jazz all of the time — top name jazz musicians. I was not fortunate enough to be able to hear those musicians because I was too young.

When I came along, most of my time was spent at the Famous Ballroom with the Left Bank. There were a few clubs that brought them in. There was Ethel's place that I absolutely loved. I'm sorry it didn't last. It was convenient. I didn't have to go to Blues Alley in D.C. to hear music. It was one of the few places where you could hear local and national musicians.

There was the Bandstand that my husband was the manager of for about three years in Fells Point. There was music every weekend.

But we don't have as many clubs, and some of the older supporters now don't want to come out and go to clubs. The younger people are not always that supportive, or maybe they're listening to a different type of music.

Q: You mentioned Blues Alley. What was that?

Binsky: Blues Alley is a jazz club in D.C. They feature national musicians most of the time. It has been there for many years. You could always hear good music there. But, you know, it's D.C. You have to drive the distance.

There are a number of clubs in and around Washington that feature jazz, not only on weekends, but during the week. You're not limited to weekends. We just don't have that in Baltimore. You have some neighborhood clubs that feature jazz, but again you're subjected to smoke and a social scene more than a listening scene. If I go to a club to hear some music, that's the reason I'm in the club. I'm not there to socialize. I want to hear the music and if it's a social scene, you may not be able to appreciate the musicians.

I'll listen in a concert setting, to hear the music without all of the distractions.

Q: You attended the Laurel Jazz Festival?

Binsky: Yes. The Laurel Jazz Festival I attended. Elzie Street was the promoter of the festival and he had a number of musicians working there. I remember Freddie Hubbard and Miles Davis were there. So many musicians were there over the two-day period — usually a Saturday and a Sunday.

Q: How long did that jazz festival?

Binsky: Only two years, '68 and '69. I think those were the only two years.

Q: You worked behind the scenes for everything.

Binsky: Which means you don't get to hear all of the music that you'd like to hear because you're doing other things.

Q: You mentioned Henry Baker.

Binsky: Yes. Henry Baker is a saxophone player who lives in Baltimore, and who traveled on the road before I knew anything about him. He owned a club on Pennsylvania Avenue called Peyton Place and, later, the Closet, which was on Franklin Street, and both of those places would bring in musicians. Peyton Place was probably in '66 or '67, somewhere along that time. The first time I heard Miles Davis in person was at Peyton Place. He brought in musicians every weekend, named musicians, and it was a nice place to go. It was on Pennsylvania, between Clifton and Bolton Avenue, across from the Red Fox, which also was a club that featured jazz, local musicians. Ethel Ennis played the Red Fox a lot.

There were other musicians of course. I didn't go there often. By the time I started going to Red Fox, they were not having as much music. Maybe ownership changed. I'm not really sure what happened. I went there a few times with other members of the Left Bank. Henry Baker was the person who opened across the street from there. He was bringing in different musicians and kept a crowd.

Q: You said that your favorite musician was Carmen McRae.

Binsky: My favorite vocalist was Carmen. Freddie Hubbard was my favorite trumpet player. Miles and Clifford Brown were a close second. I loved Billy Higgins and Philly Joe Jones as drummers. You can say one of the favorite with a list of ten, fifteen or twenty.

I remember I said that I wrote that on the internet not so long ago and someone said, what do you mean, he was your favorite trumpet player? Is he deceased?

No. It means that I now have a new favorite trumpet player. My favorite pianist is Cedar Walton, I love Cedar. I used to enjoy Albert Dailey. There are so many great musicians. Now I'm talking older musicians, but there are a lot of younger musicians who are coming along who play just as well. You get your favorites and you like them for whatever reasons. I like the drummers. I liked Billy Higgins, I loved Philly Joe Jones. I like, right now, Wanard Harper, who is a young musician who reminds me a lot of Philly Joe Jones. Bass players, I enjoyed Ron Carter and Buster Williams. They are not the only ones. Reuben Brown lived in Washington, plus he played with a lot of top-notch musicians. He was one of my favorite pianists. He is no longer playing.

Steve Novosel who was a bass player who lived in Virginia, worked a lot when my husband was managing the club, and was also one of the bass players I enjoyed. There are so many musicians. You can say one of the favorites, and you can have a list of ten or fifteen or twenty.

Q: So since you worked behind the scenes, you got to meet a lot of great musicians.

Binsky: Yes. I did.

Q: Any names that come to your mind?

Binsky: I met them because for many years I was financial secretary of Left Bank. That meant that I was the person who paid them at the end of the day. When I was paying them, it was strictly business. I met so many people. Nobody in particular sticks out in mind.

Roland Kirk, who was blind, played Left Bank and when he was paid, he was able to count his money — check all the money. He could actually tell from the feel exactly how much money he was paid, and then he separated exactly what he was going to pay each musician. I was impressed with that.

Q: Wow!

Binsky: I met Carmen at the Left Bank when she played there, and I also met her on a jazz cruise. She was one of the people there, along with Dizzy Gillespie and a number of other good musicians.

Q: Where was she from?

Binsky: The D.C. area. She lived in D.C.

Q: What other musicians came from D.C.?

Binsky: There are a lot of good musicians from Chicago, Detroit. Like Freddie, I understand, was from Detroit. Harold Maybern, who was an excellent piano player. He came out of Memphis and lived in New York and worked out of New York. A few later went to the West Coast, but most of them were East Coast musicians.

Q: How did you get started, liking jazz?

Binsky: My parents, and my relatives all listened to jazz. It was something that was played so I guess I heard it a lot. At that time, you didn't make a choice about what you were listening to. Now your parents listen to one thing, and the kids listen to another station. Well, you didn't change the radio station in the house. And it was a radio too by the way. Whatever they were playing was what you heard. I heard Billie Eckstine, and I heard Dinah [Washington], and I heard Dizzy and Jimmy Lunceford.

I didn't know a thing about Jimmy Lunceford's band other than they were playing that music. I lived across the street from some members of a group called Three Bees and a Honey. I was very young, probably five or six, but they used to rehearse, and I would go over there and just sit and listen. I don't remember their names, but the Honey would let me play with the [drum] brushes.

When I went to senior high school I joined the school band. I played the drums for a couple semesters. Of course, it wasn't jazz then.

When I was of age and able to go out and really start listening to jazz, that was the music of choice. So once I joined Left Bank, which was at that point a hobby for me, I became an active working member. That was my outlet, my hobby. Some folks play golf every day. I could have

gone to Left Bank every day. I mean, I lived for the weekend, for that Sunday when I could go to hear this next group.

Who is it going to be? — people I had never heard of. I just looked forward to that. That was my reward at the end of the week.

Q: I was reading about Left Bank, how it had financial difficulty in '77, '78. I think it was an article about how it wasn't going to have money for '78.

Binsky: I don't even remember what happened in '78. Left Bank, on a Sunday, would sometimes have a line out the door, depending on who the musician was, with people lined up on Charles Street down to Lanvale, waiting to get in. It would be packed with people coming. It must have left around '80, '81 or '82 and they were still doing weekly concerts at the time.

In later years, they ran into some financial problems. They were doing them monthly, and for a while they weren't doing any concerts. They got some funding — donations — and they were able to sell some of the tapes that they recorded in the late 60s, early 70s.

Q: Do they have tapes of all the people who played there?

Binsky: No. There were tapes made in the late 60s and 70s. We would play those tapes at club gatherings. They were just meant for our listening pleasure. Now there are CDs with the musicians that came through in the early '70s. Only eight CDs have been released.

Q: How do you get them?

Binsky: You may buy them from the Left Bank Jazz Society, record stores and me.

Q: Have you listened to them?

Binsky: Oh yes, I've listened to them, because I was at each one of those concerts. Some I remember more vividly than others. In the early years, I never missed a Sunday concert. The CDs are especially good because if I was working on the ticket booth and people were coming in, I was not able to hear that first set. Now I can really appreciate it, like you were just there last Sunday.

Q: What was it like growing up in Baltimore, when you were growing up?

Binsky: I grew up in 1940. I lived in northwest Baltimore, which is called Sandtown. I grew up as an only child. For me, I guess, it was fine. When I was nine or ten, I used to go around to my neighbors and ask them if they wanted their steps scrubbed, because we had marble steps. I would scrub their marble steps, for twenty-five cents. I had regular customers, and every other day I'd go scrub their steps.

Then around Christmas holidays, you would receive an advertisement for Christmas cards — if you wanted to sell these Christmas cards. When it would come to our house I would always take

it. It was funny because my mother never knew that I was doing it until the neighbors would say they were getting Christmas cards and this big box would come. I'd knock on the door and sell Christmas cards and the cards would end up having their names printed in them.

The money that I made from these things was a big thing because there was Read's Drugstore at the time and they always had these little dollar gifts, like four shot glasses for a dollar, or something else for a dollar. I would save these quarters up, and then at Christmas, I couldn't wait to go buy family members these little dollar gifts they probably didn't want, but I thought were so cute.

I had a good time growing up in Baltimore, elementary school. I enjoyed junior high school. We walked to school. I went to Booker T. Washington, which was on Lafayette and McCulloh. There weren't buses, and it seemed like such a long way. Well, it is. I wouldn't consider walking that far anymore. But we walked to school every day, and walked home every day, and it was fun.

Senior high school, I went to Carver Vocational Technical High. I was a business major, and, as a matter of fact, my bookkeeping teacher sometimes goes on some of the jazz trips that I give. It was a kick to see him and his wife there because he was one of our favorite teachers.

I dropped out in the eleventh grade and got married. Then I enrolled in Douglass High evening school, and I finished my last year at Douglass High. I'm always invited back, and I go back with my class that I would have graduated with the previous year. I always celebrate with them.

Growing up for me was a good time. I enjoyed that time. I have absolutely nothing to complain about. I grew up in the Methodist Church. I enjoyed being very active, singing in the choir, going to bible school, and, when I was older, teaching Bible school. I stopped going a year after I was married because I moved and it was not convenient. I have since gone back, and spend more time there now than I did for years — in the jazz scene in particular.

Q: What about your husband's clubs? He owned it for three years.

Binsky: He was a manager for three years. He and a friend from his neighborhood opened the club in the 1978, and it lasted until 1982. It was called the Bandstand and it was located on Fleet Street in Fells Point. They brought in many musicians, some I knew already and some I did not. It was a fun time, and a good time, and we have many good memories from that place. Musicians come to town now who played there often. We laugh and we talk about those days, the memories of that place.

Q: What are some of your memories?

Binsky: Oh there were so many. Well, the club would be packed (90 to 100 people). It was a small club, and there were some musicians who would not ever come on time and my husband, who hadn't heard from them, would just be so upset. Are they going to show? Will they make it? Then they would come, and they would play so well you would just forget how late they had been. If it snowed and everybody was going home, other people would be coming out to hear the music. That just never stopped them.

Some of the musicians who played there were Sonny Stitt, who was a regular at the Bandstand, Reuben Brown, Steve Novosel and Dude Brown, a drummer who was a regular. They were like the house band. Then for a while, Philly Joe Jones came a lot, and along with Sonny Stitt, and there was Tommy Flanagan and Harold Maybern. There were more musicians than I can think of: Cecil Payne, Curtis Fuller, and Gary Bartz played a lot, Albert Dailey, who was an excellent pianist from Baltimore — Stan Getz said that of all the pianists he played with, Albert Dailey was by far his favorite — Ira Sullivan, Red Rodney, Charlie Rouse, Rufus Reid, Buster Williams, Big Nick Nickolas, Bobby Watson, Art Pepper, Al Cohn, Pepper Adams

Q: In the Baltimore jazz community, did everybody know each other?

Binsky: You may not have known their name, but you recognized the face and sometimes have conversations. Left Bank seated maybe about five or six hundred people.

The Bandstand, for instance, you could only get a hundred twenty-five or a hundred fifty people squeezed in. Most of the people knew each other and it was an interracial scene. They would just be packed in and it was just a grand time. It was like the room was always filled with love. It was just a good time, just a real good scene.

When you go to a concert at the museum, and it's concert style and you sit there and you applaud. Every once in a while it gets a little emotional, but it's not as emotional as it was then.

It starts exactly at five, and forty-five minutes, cut, that's it. There is not a lot of time for improvisation, to really get into it with the musician. That you can have the back and forth thing happening.

Maybe the alcohol helped it along, but it didn't make a lot of difference. It was just a good time.

END OF INTERVIEW